

Uncovering an Indiana Treasure . . .

Lewis and Clark



Can you imagine what the United States of America was like in the year 1803? The country itself was just a little more than 25 years old, and the state of Indiana was part of what was known as the “Indiana Territory” (which included what is now the states of Indiana, Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois and a large portion of Minnesota). The original 13 colonies were well on their way to becoming completely settled and developed. Kentucky became a state in 1792, and Tennessee was admitted to the union in 1796. Ohio would be admitted to the union this year. The land in the west, which included Indiana, was still very much a wild frontier area with sparse settlements located throughout the Indiana Territory. Further west, European settlement was either very limited or non-existent.

In the land that would eventually become the state of Indiana, settlement was concentrated along the Ohio River. One of those early settlements was Clarksville. Established in 1783, it was given to George Rogers Clark as part of a land grant for his valorous service during the American Revolution. In 1803, he was living in a cabin with his younger brother William in a place that is still known as the “Falls of the Ohio.”

George Rogers Clark was a friend of President Thomas Jefferson. They both shared an interest in paleontology and archaeology and frequently corresponded about such topics. In fact, when Jefferson was originally planning an expedition to explore the untamed “west,” his first thought for an expeditionary leader was his friend, George Rogers Clark. This was back in 1783. However, circumstances prohibited the older Clark from joining the expedition and the role would ultimately fall to his younger brother, William.

On April 30, 1803, the United States doubled its size with the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France. This area of land was over 800,000 square miles and stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. The U.S. purchased the land for the sum of \$15 million dollars, or less than three cents an acre. Secretly, Jefferson already had designs on exploring the Louisiana Territory even before the purchase. However, now he had certain justifications in planning an “official” expedition. This journey would not only explore the newly acquired area, but would also search for a “northwest passage” that would lead to the Pacific Ocean. This all-important waterway passage would hopefully link the Atlantic with the Pacific and would ultimately open the unexplored west to commerce, trade and settlement.

The president turned to his 29-year-old private secretary, Captain Meriwether Lewis, to lead the expedition west. Even though the primary goal of the expedition was to find the significant “northwest passage,” Jefferson also required the young leader, who was an experienced naturalist, to take detailed notes about the climate, plant life, animals and geology of the area that was explored. Also, Jefferson included stipulations about greeting and making acquaintances with the local Native Americans to hopefully encourage trade in the future.

The demands of the expedition were enormous, and Lewis turned to 33-year-old William Clark, a friend from his army days in Ohio, to act as co-commander. Even though Clark was officially a lieutenant and of lower rank than Lewis, Jefferson considered Clark an equal leader of the party. Therefore, it was in the summer of 1803, that William Clark, living at his brother’s cabin, received a letter from Meriwether Lewis officially inviting him to help command the expedition, and to start looking for “good hunters, stout, healthy, unmarried men, accustomed to the woods, and capable of bearing bodily fatigue in a pretty considerable degree.”

Clark begins his recruitment efforts during that summer. In fact, almost one-third of the permanent members of the “Corps of Discovery” came from the immediate area of the Falls of the Ohio. This included a group known as the “Nine Young Men from Kentucky,” even though not all were from Kentucky. In fact, many of the men did or would have significant ties to Indiana. These included Sergeant Charles Floyd, Private John Shields and Private William Bratton. Floyd, who is Floyd County Indiana’s namesake, was the first constable of Clarksville Township and was the only member of the expedition to die on the journey (of a ruptured appendix). Shields, the oldest member of the expedition at the age of 34, was also the only married member of the group. Lewis had specifically requested that only unmarried men be included on the expedition. However, Shields’ skills as a blacksmith, gunsmith, craftsman and hunter were invaluable to the success of the mission. At the return of the expedition, he settled near Corydon. Bratton was a blacksmith, gunsmith and hunter. At the end of the expedition, he settled in Waynetown, Indiana, where he became the father of eight sons and two daughters. He was the first justice of the peace of Wayne Township and was the first superintendent of schools in his area.

Meriwether Lewis arrived at the Falls of the Ohio on October 14, 1803. Lewis and Clark spent almost two weeks at the Falls of the Ohio, recruiting and enlisting men in the army, gathering supplies and preparing for the expedition. No doubt there were many hours spent in the cabin planning the journey and getting advice from George Rogers Clark, who was very knowledgeable on the West.

On October 26, 1803, Lewis, Clark, Clark’s slave, York, and the nine young men from Kentucky left for St. Louis. They established a base camp at Wood River outside the city, and it was here where they recruited the rest of their civilian hunters, army soldiers and French boatmen. While not all made the entire journey to the Pacific, there were a total of 48 men in the Corps of Discovery when the expedition “officially” left St. Louis on May 21, 1804.

The expedition returned to St. Louis on September 23, 1806, with the loss of only one life – a remarkable feat for the time period. Sadly, the Lewis and Clark expedition did not find the all-important “northwest passage” to the Pacific, but its successes far outweigh the negatives. This expedition was the “first” United States overland exploration of the American West and Pacific Northwest. It would set a pattern for future government-sponsored explorations in the United States. The journals, maps, and plant and animal specimens amounted to a Western encyclopedia with the discovery of several new plant and animal species. The journey also established peaceful contact with many unknown Native American groups. At the end of the journey, the Corps of Discovery disbanded with each member going his own way. On November 5, 1806, Lewis, Clark, York and others returned to the Falls of the Ohio, and to the place where their journey really began.

Additional Resources:

Ambrose, Stephen. *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

Bennett, Pamela J., ed. “Lewis and Clark – Indiana Connections.” *The Indiana Historian* January 2003.

Lewis and Clark 2003 – 2006. Indiana Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commission 29 Mar. 2003.

www.in.gov/dnr/lewis-clark/

Lewis and Clark in Clarksville, Indiana. Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Signature Event in Clarksville, Indiana 1 Apr. 2003. www.lewisandclarinclarksville.org

“Lewis and Clark Expedition.” Encarta 1 Apr. 2003.

www.encyclopedia.msn.com/encnet/refpages/RefArticle.aspx?refid=761569929&pn=1